Interaction Across Cultures:

Barriers and possible strategies through intercultural education

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Introduction

How do people across the Euro-Mediterranean regions interact? How do they construct the representation of the 'others'? What is the role of the media in this process? And what are the current barriers to cross-cultural interaction?
Module 3 focused on cross-cultural interactions between the two shores of the Mediterranean, through the use of avenues such as social media, the neighborhood and the public spheres. The aim was to evaluate strategies in order to bring people together by encouraging the acceptance of diversity.

Interactions were firstly explored by taking into consideration the levels of cross-cultural encounters that people had in the past year and the relations they hold with the people from the other shore. On a second stance, attention was given to the effects that contacts generated on people's views with respect to each other. Then, the survey's findings were analyzed, also considering the challenges brought forward. Finally, it was examined how to bring societies together by fostering social cohesion through creative arts such as cultural events and education.

The module tackles multicultural interactions among authors belonging to a wide array of different cultural backgrounds. It introduces *Zapata-Barrero's* argument that interculturalism is the appropriate method for the promotion of dialogue, interactions at the individual level, and a way to avoid social exclusion and inequalities. Moschis-Gauguet instead discusses cross-culturalism in the context of cities as an environment where connections are created, insisting on the importance of art and creativity for transcending barriers. On the same page, Abrignani focuses on the value of travel as a means of mutual and intercultural understanding, allowing for personal contact and for contrasting prejudices.
Fahmy and Valsta then offer evidence in support of the claim that relying on meaningful interactions is the right way forward in a context of increasing mobility. In parallel, Büchler concentrates on media as seemingly contributing to negative or limited perceptions of the region. Also Gillespie, while finding language and stereotypes as the main barriers to cross-cultural encounters, considers indeed the role of media in increasing this phenomenon. Then, when bringing together the unit, Bean and Tabbara, among others, discuss the ways to bring societies together through creative arts and intercultural education.

Cross-Cultural Interaction

One of the most significant findings of the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey is that it confirms the increasing relevance of virtual exchange as the main source of interaction for southern and eastern Mediterraneans. Respectively, neighborhood encounters are steadily increasing in Europe while slowing down on the other shore of the Mediterranean. Specifically, Moschis-Gauguet analyses cross-culturalism in the context of cities, where interactions with people from different social and religious backgrounds tend to happen more frequently. We see that social media is indeed the most used avenue for interaction by inhabitants of the SEM region at 25%; while only 5% of Europeans employ this method (*Chart 15.3*). The data was then compared to 39% of Europeans who tend to prefer casual cross-cultural interactions in the public space, followed by meetings in business, neighborhood and schools; as compared to just 13% for SEM people (*Chart 15.3*). Contacts through the internet and social media ranked highest on the part of southern and eastern mediterranean countries (*Chart 15.3*). Moreover, data show that more than 50 percent of Europeans had interacted with someone from the other region during the past year, compared to only 35% of SEM respondents.

By the same token, Abrignani places emphasis on the value of travel as a way to enhance intercultural understanding through personal contacts, examining whether it is still valuable in today's digital era of virtual travels. In fact survey's data show 32% (*Chart 15.4*) of southern and eastern Mediterraneans aged 15-29 who prefer to use social media for interactions, with public casual encounters becoming less frequent.

As it regards interactions at the individual level, the encouragement of dialogue and the avoidance of social exclusion, Zapata-Barrero argues that the multicultural policy narrative which has been dominant in the last decades promotes the inclusion of immigrants by respecting their differences. However, instead of being a factor of integration this model has shown the opposite effect. Thus he proposes the intercultural paradigm, which holds the view of diversity as an advantage and a resource, an opportunity for integration and socio-economic improvement. He discusses that, focusing on dialogue and interaction is the most appropriate tool to promote mutual-knowledge and prejudice reduction. He explains that viewing diversity as an advantage means understanding that an immigrant has added skills in terms of social and cultural capital, such as language, particular world-views and knowledge. As a result, there's the need to re-design policies to treat diversity as a potential added value for public benefit.

The Representation of the 'Other'

As a matter of fact, in analyzing what effects the cross-cultural encounters had on the respondents' view of one another, the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey carried out in 2016 (*Charts 6.1 and 6.2*) illustrated a correlation between the level of people's appreciation of diversity and the kind of intercultural interaction they had experienced. The findings also demonstrated that the kind of approach and place of interaction had an impact on the responses. In fact, we notice that among European respondents both online and school interactions tend to produce a positive change of view about the 'other' (37% and 32% respectively) and let people see diversity as a source of prosperity for society (74% and 78.5% respectively). Among southern and eastern Mediterraneans instead it was registered a similar level of positive change about Europeans when the interaction had taken place in the school, in the neighborhood or in the public space (57%, 57% and 60% respectively) (*Chart 6.2*).

However by looking at the results at country level, Poland scores lower on those who reported that meeting Europeans had positively changed their views. Konrad Pędziwiatr explains that Poland emerged from the Second World War with very small ethnic and religious minorities, a factor that still poses limitations on cross-cultural encounters. In fact, by looking at *Chart 20.4* we can see that while the majority of Europeans (53%) had encountered someone from the SEM countries in the last year, only 29% of Poles have had any contact. This leads to a comparison between 2012 and 2016 (Chart 20.2) which shows a decreasing number of Poles believing that cultural and religious diversity are relevant factors for the prosperity of society. Followed by the fact that they do not see any benefit from the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. But what there's to keep in mind is that negative attitudes towards 'the others' develop not due to encounters, but in the absence of contacts.

In this respect, Nabil Fahmy and Emilia Vasta offer evidence asserting that working on building meaningful interaction is the right way forward, especially in the context of a rising mobility and immigration from the SEM region. Nevertheless, when it comes to intercultural exchanges they argue that one should proceed with caution as there is the likelihood of misunderstandings when discussing topics such as women's role in society or the perception of diversity.

From another perspective, Nayla Tabbara notices how European and southern and eastern Mediterranean respondents don't necessarily share the idea of diversity as a source of prosperity, seeing others as a threat to their economy. One reason for this is linked to the refugee crisis. In fact Spencer, although he notices a growing appetite for mutual knowledge and understanding, shifts the focus on the renewed debate about trans-Mediterranean migration, set off by the events of Lampedusa in 2013, suggesting that existing obstacles for powerful relations between the two shores are likely to remain. He urges the need for more imaginative and humane ways of addressing the movements of people within and beyond the Mediterranean region.

Main Barriers to Cross-Cultural Interaction

When it comes to obstacles for cross-cultural interaction, both European and southern and eastern Mediterranean respondents indicate language and cultural barriers as the most significant ones, followed by stereotypes. In order to contrast them, Moschis-Gauguet claims that art and

creativity are extremely important and capable of transcending cultural, religious and language barriers.
In this respect, Büchler and Gillespie analyse findings which suggest another typology of barrier: that of the media, which would contribute to a negative, rather than a positive image of the region, as an agent that aggravates on the issue through the spreading of misleading stereotypes.

On these grounds, for instance, Inès Safi advocates for female role models in order to break some of the gender stereotyping. Whereas Abrignani focuses on youth exchanges from both sides of the Mediterranean as the approach to counter prejudices and foster intercultural dialogue; by quoting Averroès: "Ignorance leads to fear; fear leads to hate; hate leads to violence. That's the equation."

Strategy Evaluation

After having looked into the analysis of cross-cultural interaction and its barriers, it is appropriate to discover the strategies that can be used to better bring society together, increase that interaction and remove those barriers or neutralize their effects. In this process, the emphasis is on the role of social enterprises in the creative sector which can increase social cohesion through some tools such as multi-cultural events and intercultural education.

The analysis by Teresa Bean reveals that the function of creative arts as an instrument to enhance multicultural awareness is well reflected in both subject groups' responses. Both Europeans and southern and eastern Mediterranean people stress the role of schools by 89% and 82% respectively; as well as multicultural events at 82% for both in intercultural awareness in the society (*Chart 16.1*). By the same token, the 2016 Survey results also support the case of creative social entrepreneurship in the region in order to tackle radicalization: 82% of respondents from the SEM region and 74% from Europe hold the belief that cultural and artistic initiatives would be functional in preventing and dealing with conflict (*Chart 16.3*). One important point that Bean highlights is the setting in which these cross-cultural interactions occur. One of the examples is the practice of such interaction in public spaces between Italians and migrants, which has developed by 50 percent. Also, in her survey more than half of respondents in three countries (Portugal, Finland and France) and less than half in four other countries (Israel, Poland, Jordan and Palestine) believe that intercultural schools are an essential part of teaching for children in order to learn how to live in a multicultural environment. Specifically, the promotion of cultural diversity in public spaces was valued as constructive to foster multiculturalism, with European respondents (67%) and southern and eastern Mediterraneans' (80%) in agreement (*Chart 16.1*).
Moreover, a corresponding approach is suggested by Moschis-Gauguet regarding the importance of cultural artworks representation in public spaces. This way, she believes we can transfer knowledge of one's culture to the society and as a result, improve participation of the public and facilitate integration.

Another significant factor which needs to be taken into account is the efficiency of cross-cultural interaction. Based on Tabbara's findings, this highly depends on fighting back misinformation about other cultures and migrants as a consequential barrier. Thus, she recommends that intercultural education should try to explain the real causes behind migration and present accurate numbers and true stories for a better understanding of refugees' circumstances. She believes that there is a tendency by demagogues to disrupt the cross-cultural interaction by misleading information and narration for their own political advantage.

Finally, creative arts include various activities in the creative industry which can provide innovative solutions to social problems. These activities, which include a wide range of creative disciplines such as fashion, music, theatre, film, literature, design, media, digital sectors, architecture, radio and television, can facilitate dialogue and expression of culture in a safe environment and help to internalize one's own reality as well as the reality of others. However, it needs to be taken into consideration that the value of creative arts goes beyond the economic aspect; it is a medium for cultural and social development.

Conclusion

Considering the survey's data (*Chart 16.2*), we can notice that creative social enterprise could be the key to develop intercultural dialogue, overthrowing the main barriers faced across the Euro-Mediterranean region, namely language, cultural differences and stereotypes. Taking into consideration the challenges for the creation of an environment suitable for creative social enterprises, such as public support, according to Teresa Bean recommendations for its development in the Euro-Mediterranean region would first include to coin a universally understood term and working definition for it, so to facilitate its visibility. Increasing awareness would serve to improve cross-cultural dialogue as a mean to attract private and public investments and foster creative social entrepreneurship in the region.

On the same lines, there's the need to improve access to finance for creative social enterprises: promoting cooperation with private sectors, government stakeholders and intergovernmental entities is vital for this scope as well as for long-term social investments or start-up fundings. Advocacy strategies are also required to deal with the constraints of regulation. This is particularly important for the Southern Mediterranean region where creative social enterprises do not enjoy special legal status and business start-up is often complex, time consuming and costly.

Moreover, one pivotal component for these enterprises has to do with enhancing local capacity and IT infrastructure. Collaborating with educational institutions and civic organizations is fundamental in order to develop entrepreneurial skills amongst youth, as well as providing access to digital tools. Ultimately, developing the use of cross-sector networks would be crucial to create a space for dialogue for youth in the southern and eastern Mediterranean region and its counterparts in Europe.

Adopting a local framework of action is also what has been advocated by Zapata-Barrero and the intercultural policy paradigm. A local approach hods two key advantages: proximity, which allows to promote face to face relations and to develop policies at the micro-level in public spaces; and pragmatism, in which action prevails over abstract notions.

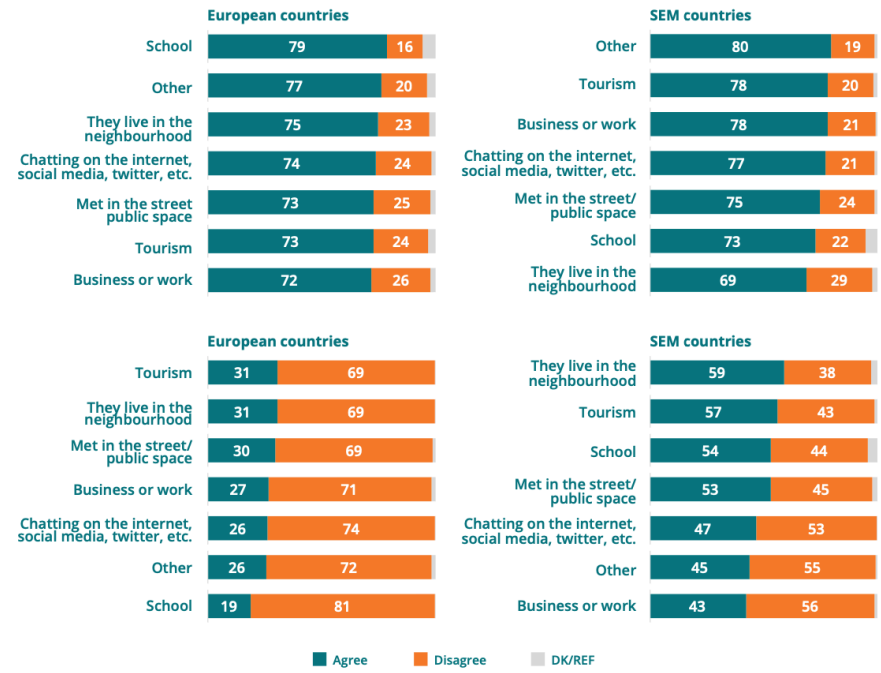
As noted by Büchler, youth represents the most urgent target of any initiatives aiming to elicit conversations and dialogue across the Euro-Mediterranean region. In discussing the multi-faceted approach to diversity she highlights how planning a strategy for translation that takes into consideration linguistic and cultural complexities would be crucial to foster the sharing of perspectives. Facilitating networking and encounters, shifting the focus from the translation of printed texts to a broader scope that includes the use of digital media, and acknowledging the power of creative writing is the way forward to understand the perplexities on the co-existence of different communities and to reverse common stereotypes.

Nowadays, migration and human mobility in general have shaped the current globalization characterized by the inherent lack of control over boundaries and its impact on states' economies. There's a need for a policy whose main target is to encourage a contact-based approach among people. It is under these premises that it would be possible to find the space for the legitimization of interculturalism.

Appendix

Chart 6.1

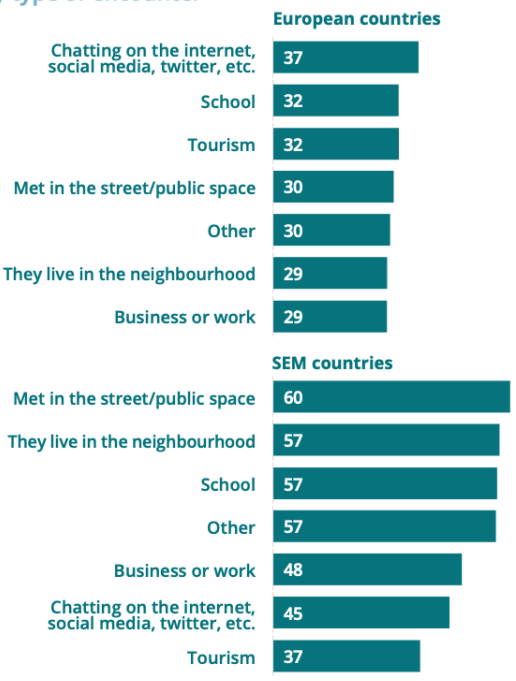
Agreement with statements on cultural and religious diversity, by method of cross-cultural encounters



Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? **Base:** respondents who have talked to or met someone from a SEM/European country in the past 12 months (%), by method of cross-cultural encounters and region (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).

Chart 6.2

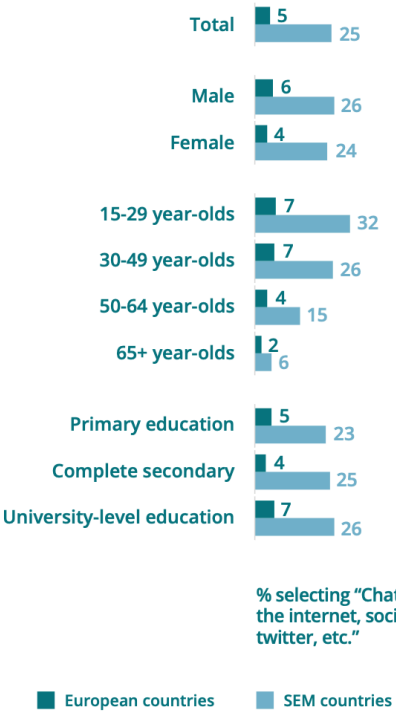
Impact of cross-cultural encounters, by type of encounter



Survey question: Thinking of your encounter(s) with this/these person(s), did meeting or talking to them change or reinforce your view of people from countries bordering the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea (asked in European countries)/European countries (asked in SEM countries)? **Base:** respondents who have talked to or met someone from a SEM/European country in the past 12 months (% 'Yes, mainly in a positive way'), by method of cross-cultural encounters and region (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).

Chart 15.4

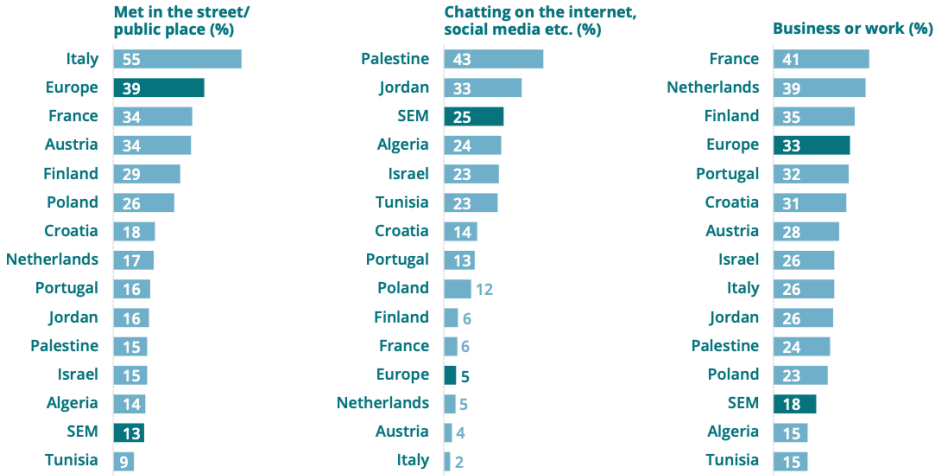
Contact on internet and social media as method of interaction in cross-cultural encounters, by region and socio-demographic groups



Survey question: Thinking of this/these person(s) you have interacted with, was this mainly through: **Base:** respondents who have talked to or met someone from a SEM/European country in the past 12 months (% 'Chatting on the internet, social media, twitter, etc.'), by region and socio-demographic groups. (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos Poll 2016).

Chart 15.3

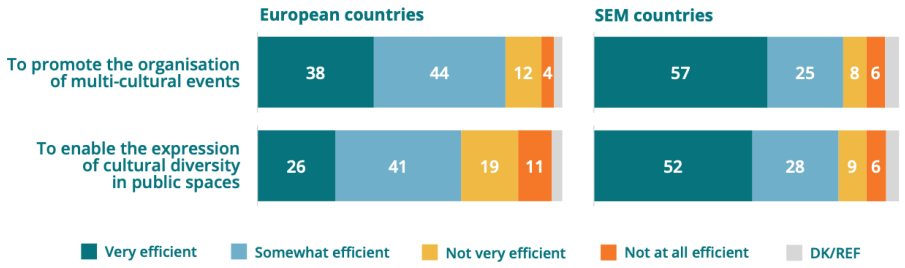
Cross-cultural encounters: method of interaction



Survey question: Compared to their present role in your country, do you think that women should be playing a greater, the same, or lesser role in each of the following domains: **Base:** all respondents (% 'greater role'), by country. (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016)

Chart 16.1

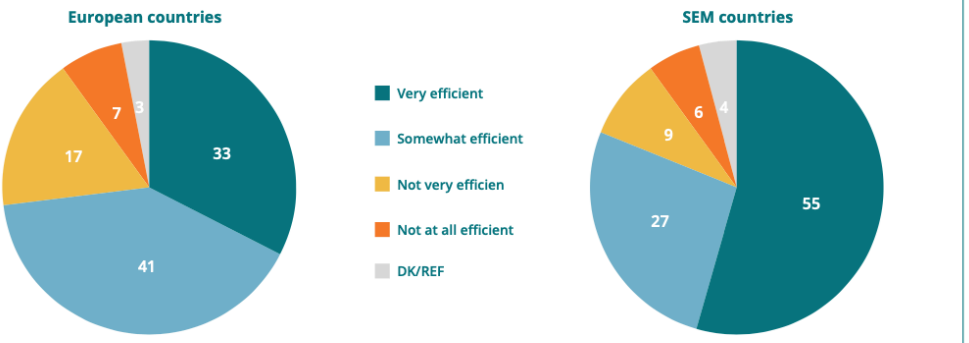
Living better together in multicultural environments: enabling cultural expression in public spaces and organising multicultural events



Survey question: Today's societies are becoming more and more diverse, with people from different cultures and countries living together. How efficient do you think that each of the following actions would be in helping people live better together in a multi-cultural environment? **Base:** all respondents (%), European countries, by level of religiosity (© Anna Lindh / Ipsos Poll 2016).

Chart 16.2

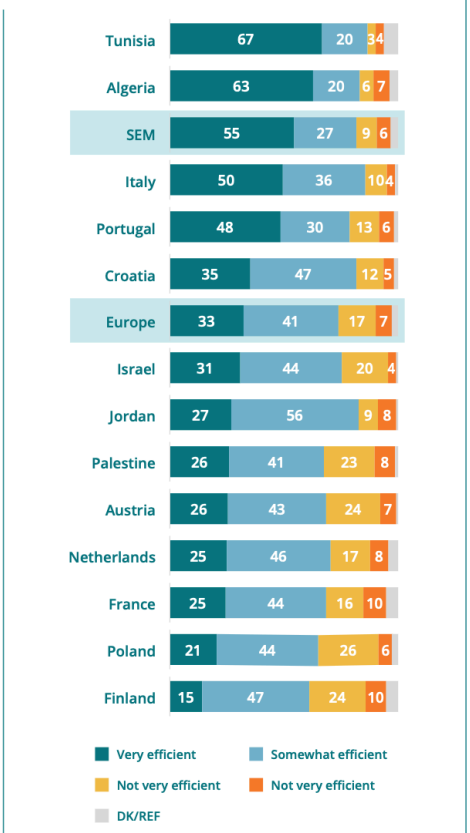
Efficiency of mechanisms to prevent and deal with conflicts and radicalisation: cultural and artistic initiatives



Survey question: Many countries, in Europe and in the countries on the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores, are facing challenges, such as conflicts and radicalisation. How efficient do you think that each of the following mechanisms will be in preventing and dealing with these challenges? **Base:** all respondents (%), by region. (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos Poll 2016).

Chart 16.3

Preventing and dealing with conflicts and radicalisation via cultural and artistic initiatives, by country



Survey question: Many countries, in Europe and in the countries on the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores, are facing challenges, such as conflicts and radicalisation. How efficient do you think that each of the following mechanisms will be in preventing and dealing with these challenges? **Base:** all respondents (%), by country. (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos Poll 2016).

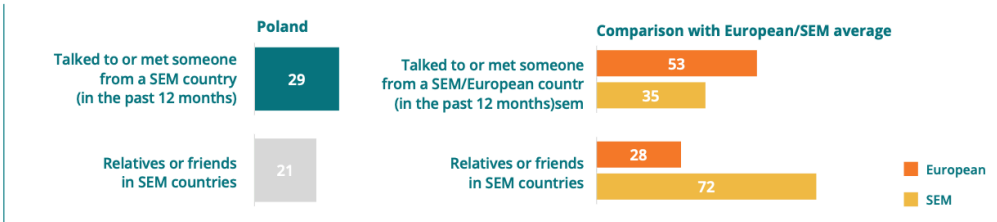
Chart 20.2

Key values when raising children in Poland

Survey question: In bringing up their children, parents in different countries may place different emphasis on different values. Assuming that we limit ourselves to six values only, I'd like to know which one of these is most important, to you personally, when raising children? And the second most important? **Base:** all respondents (%), results for France (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).

Chart 20.4

Interactions with people from different countries in Poland



Survey question: In the past 12 months, have you talked to or met someone from a country bordering the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea (asked in European countries)/a European country (asked in SEM countries)? (top bar in the chart) Do you have any relatives or friends who live in countries bordering the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea (asked in European countries)/European countries (asked in SEM countries)? (bottom bar) (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).